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**Reading Ottoman *şehnâmes*:
official historiography in the late sixteenth century**

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During the second half of the sixteenth century the Ottoman sultans employed large numbers of craftsmen to produce various kinds of precious items and works of art for palace use. Among these items was a series of illustrated manuscripts known generally as *şehnâmes* (lit. ‘king’s book’), with text composed by a salaried appointee known as the *şehnâmeçi* and set in presentation volumes specially prepared by calligraphers, miniaturists, illuminators and bookbinders from the imperial ateliers. The significance of this corpus of around fifteen specially commissioned works is open to debate: are they literary panegyric or dynastic propaganda, imitative cultural symbols or useful documentary record? Most *şehnâmes* contain a chronological narrative of part or the whole of Ottoman dynastic history, sometimes presenting it as the pinnacle of Muslim world history, sometimes recounting only recent, almost contemporary events. In this sense they are historical works and the *şehnâmeçis* may be considered official court historiographers. On the other hand, *şehnâmes* were composed in a rhetorical literary style consciously based on that of the popular Persian epic of legendary warrior heroes, the *Şahname* of Firdavsi, with the most prestigious texts written in Persian verse in the same *mesnevi* form and *mütekârib* metre as their eleventh-century model. Most exist in a single copy kept originally in the palace library and the majority are lavishly illustrated with costly miniature paintings. In this sense, Ottoman *şehnâmes* were specific cultural artefacts and celebratory art treasures. Their high quality miniatures have been much studied by art historians.¹ At the first level, that of chronicle narrative, they have been largely ignored by both Ottoman and modern historians, due to their relative inaccessibility in the

¹ For an overview see J.M. Rogers (ed.), *The Topkapı Sarayı Museum: the albums and illustrated manuscripts* (London 1986), esp. 15-16, 205-7 and illustrations. For more specific discussions, see Selmin Kangal and Priscilla Mary Işın (eds), *The sultan’s portraits: picturing the House of Osman* (Istanbul 2000).

palace library, to their literary associations, and to the simplistic assumption that commissioned works are unreliable historical sources.

Ottoman *şehnâme*s fall into the difficult category of literary-historical texts which seem to be neither one thing nor the other and not to lead anywhere. Yet they were produced at considerable expense and effort for half a century spanning the reigns of three sultans. There is no doubt that one intention behind the commissioning of *şehnâme* works was to establish an acceptably 'correct' Ottoman historical record. Süleyman (1520-66) and his immediate successors Selim II (1566-74) and Murad III (1574-95) clearly felt a need to employ such official historiographers, despite the fact that there was no lack of other historians presenting work to them, either spontaneously or by *ad hoc* commission. Evidence shows that sultans or their advisers monitored the progress of each *şehnâme* and that text had to be approved. In this sense *şehnâme*s were indeed 'the propagandist voice of the court'² and their authors were the sultan's spokesmen. However, the majority of the finished products were then kept in the inner confines of the palace beyond the reach of a contemporary audience. Why take such care with the production of these works if they were not intended to be widely read and to have influence? One of the standard reasons for historical writing given by Ottoman writers was that it guaranteed the survival of a ruler's name and fame – but surely only if texts were well known and understood, if the propagandist voice were heard. Further, these commissioned histories were not produced to help establish a new dynasty but at the supposed height of Ottoman magnificence. If they were meant to contain an 'official line', what was this and how did it differ from previous presentations? Individual commissioned histories had often been used in support of individual sultans. Bayezid II (1481-1512) had several works written to help confirm his own right to succeed and to emphasize the authority of the dynasty following the upheavals of Mehmed II's era and the tensions of the civil war of 1481-2. Also, early in his own reign Süleyman commissioned a series of works aiming to restore the reputation of his father Selim I (1512-20). It is significant that Süleyman established the post of court historiographer during the 1550s, a period when his adult sons were seen as potential challengers to his authority.

A major aspect of the post of *şehnâmeçi* in the later sixteenth century is that it was permanent, harnessing an existing genre for dynastic purposes. Individual writers had composed *şehnâme* works (or works with the word *şehnâme* in their title) from the late

² Baki Tezcan, 'The politics of early modern Ottoman historiography' in Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman (eds), *The early modern Ottomans: remapping the empire* (Cambridge 2007), 183.

fifteenth century onwards, usually to eulogize the deeds of the reigning sultan. Occasional examples occur in the early seventeenth century, including one-off commissions by Osman II (1618-22) and Murad IV (1623-40).³ However, regular *şehname* production ceased around 1600 and the post lapsed soon afterwards. No other form of continuous 'official history' took its place until later in the seventeenth century and the appointment of a *vak'a-nüvis*.⁴ The commissioning of *şehname* historiography is therefore specific to a short but crucial period in Ottoman history. The sultan's visibly active participation in warfare and government reached its peak in the early years of Süleyman's reign, giving way to the predominantly sedentary imperial image exemplified by Murad III, a sultan much criticised by contemporaries for his style of rule and whose reign was often identified by later historians as marking the beginning of Ottoman 'decline'. Murad III was an enthusiastic commissioner of *şehname* texts, especially those where the focus of *şehname* writing turned more upon the priorities of the palace-based sultan than on those of the active military leader in traditional *Şahname* style. However, his immediate successors paid little attention to *şehname* writing, probably for a variety of reasons, personal and political. Different individual tastes meant that neither Mehmed III (1595-1603) nor Ahmed I (1603-17) were patrons of art or literature to the same extent as Murad III. Although production did not cease entirely, far fewer illuminated manuscripts were compiled in the early seventeenth century and most were not historical works.⁵ At the same time, high production costs for illuminated manuscripts must have appeared extravagant in an era of financial stress exemplified by revolts of the household troops over pay in 1589 and 1593 and of the wider *celali* problem. Mehmed III is known for his immediate reduction of the numbers of eunuchs, dwarfs and extras in the inner palace and for avoiding the harem excesses of his father. Reducing the number of artists involved in the arts of the book, and therefore of books produced, was a small but obvious and symbolic means by which a sultan could acknowledge financial difficulties and curtail at least one element of palace expenses. Above all, the use of court historiography in itself may have become controversial in the hands of Murad III. Baki Tezcan's argument, discussed below, that *şehname* writings 'failed' because they attempted to justify an unacceptable form of

³ See Christine Woodhead, 'An experiment in official historiography: the post of *şehnameci* in the Ottoman empire, c. 1555-1605', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 73 (1983), 157-82 for a basic account of the post, its personnel and its products.

⁴ Cf. L.V. Thomas (ed. N. Itzkowitz), *A study of Naima* (New York 1972); Tezcan, 'Politics of early modern Ottoman historiography', 180-98.

⁵ Rogers (ed.), *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi: the albums and illustrated manuscripts*, 251.

‘royal absolutism’ assesses court historiography within the problematic political context of the late sixteenth century.⁶

Although study of the textual content of *şehnames* should reveal much about the desired presentation of dynastic images and sultanic ideology in this crucial period, such detailed comparative work is not possible at present since only two of the fifteen texts have been published and neither is one of the major works. This essay will therefore look in general at how contemporaries might have ‘read’ the purpose of *şehname* texts in the context of sultanic authority, and how we might understand them today.

Contemporary readings

The fact that most *şehname* works exist in unique copies only, that they are generally in excellent condition, and that there are virtually no references to them in the works of other Ottoman historians, suggests that they were not read at all by contemporaries in the usual sense of reading, and therefore made no contribution to the historical content of other works. Whether or not this was strictly the case, such an assessment is tangential to the main purposes for which *şehnames* were produced. It misses the point that the essential target audience was not a public or popular one, but the sultan, his entourage and his advisers. Admittedly, it remains difficult to assess the influence of *şehname* manuscripts within this relatively closed circle but certain aspects of production and context are worth further consideration.

The major sixteenth-century Ottoman historians were government employees with political experience, like the chancellors Celalzade (d.1567) and Ramazanzade (d. 1571), a recognized scholar such as the sultan’s tutor Hoca Sadeddin (d. 1599), or a prolific litterateur like Mustafa Ali (d. 1600). By contrast, none of the five men appointed *şehnameci* was recognized either as a major historian or as a leading poet or man of letters, either on appointment or at any time thereafter. The first three, Arifî (in office early 1550s to 1561), Eflatun (c.1562-69) and Lokman (c.1569-96) were appointed for their ability to compose Persian couplets in the *mesnevi* style. The fourth and fifth *şehnameci*s, Talikîzade (c.1592-1600) and Hasan Hükmî (1601) were trained as secretaries in the imperial council and were highly competent professional writers of Ottoman *inşa* prose. The first requirement in *şehnameci* appointments was clearly literary ability, rather than historical or political understanding; the intention was to produce well-phrased texts and to draw pictures with

⁶ Tezcan, ‘Politics of early modern Ottoman historiography’, 171-80.

words. To what extent were these artistic words simply framework for the real illustrations and to what extent do the two aspects complement each other? The relationship between text and illustrations, like that between prose and verse in Ottoman works, deserves further study.

The system of production shows that text was submitted for approval before final copying. Aşık Çelebi records how Arifî presented sections of verse to Süleyman in the early 1550s and how the post of *şehnameci* was established for him as a result.⁷ This leaves open the question of whether or not it had been Süleyman's original intention to create a permanent post. The practice of approving work in progress clearly continued throughout the post's existence. Lokman describes in the *Şahname-i Selim Han* (completed 1581) how he had been asked by the grand vezir Sokullu Mehmed Pasha to submit samples of verse for examination by what amounted to a vetting committee consisting of the sultan, the grand vezir, the *şeyhülislam* Ebussuud Efendi and other leading religious scholars. Writing could proceed only if samples were found acceptable, although Lokman does not state what the criteria were.⁸ Extensive research and consultation also took place in the late 1570s to ensure the accuracy of the portraits of sultans contained in Lokman's *Kiyâfetü 'l-insaniye fi şema'ili 'l-'Osmaniye* (1579), the one work where it clearly is the case that the relatively brief text was intended as captioning for the pictures.⁹ Later, in the introduction to his account of the 1594 Hungarian campaign, Talikîzade describes how a work he had recently presented to Murad III had not been accepted and how he had departed for Hungary in distress.¹⁰ The text of a *şehname* must therefore have been important in its own right. The two chief reasons why are the maintenance of a high literary standard commensurate with the imperial images portrayed and the principle of correct and accurate content, to match the obvious documentary nature of the illustrations. Both literary style and accuracy would have been factors in a third reason for ensuring an appropriate standard of text – the possibility that it might be read aloud for the entertainment and edification of the sultan and his companions within the palace. While no evidence has yet been found that *şehname* texts were used in this way, others such as the *Iskendername* and the *Şahnama* itself – with specialist readers known as *şehname-h^van* – certainly were. The musical qualities of both verse and rhymed prose would have been particularly important in this respect.

⁷ Woodhead, 'Experiment in official historiography', 160.

⁸ Fıfız Çağman, 'Şahname-i Selim Han ve minyatürleri', *Sanat tarihi yfllığı* 5 (1972-3), 412-15.

⁹ Facsimile edition ed. M. Tayşı, *Kiyâfetü 'l-insâniyye fi şemâili 'l-'Osmâniyye* (Istanbul 1987).

¹⁰ On Murad's possible criticisms, see Christine Woodhead, 'Murad III and the historians', in Hakan T. Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski (eds), *Legimitizing the order: the Ottoman rhetoric of state power* (Leiden 2005), 94-5

The initial audience for *şehname* texts was thus the sultan himself, who not only commissioned but actively monitored the production of such works. Several of his senior statesmen were also aware of, if not actually consulted about, their content. Copies of one of Lokman's less spectacular productions, *Zübdetü 't-tevarih*, were presented to three of Murad III's closest associates, Hoca Sadeddin, the grand vezir and the chief black eunuch.¹¹ At least eight copies exist of the portrait album mentioned above, some made in the seventeenth century with portraits of later sultans added. This was probably the most well known and relatively well disseminated *şehname* text. A third type of audience must also have existed, within the palace. It is inconceivable that a sultan such as Süleyman or Murad III would not have wished to read and admire a *şehname* text once it had been completed and deposited in his private collection. He would not have done so alone. A miniature painting in a non-*şehname* work by Cenabî dated 1582 shows Murad III seated in his private library accompanied by his senior pages and other servants.¹² According to the memoirs of Murad's Jewish physician Domenico, this library contained 'two cupboards with glass doors' in which 'there are always some two dozen illuminated books, which he is accustomed to read often'.¹³ A sultan was always attended by at least two, and often probably more, senior pages of the privy chamber. These men, soon to be promoted to important military and administrative posts in central and provincial government and many of them to become *damads* (royal sons-in-law), were party to the sultan's reading of *şehname* manuscripts among these illuminated books and must have been aware of the images of dynastic achievement and values which they presented. How this awareness may have informed political debate over sultanic authority in the early seventeenth century is at present purely a matter of conjecture and harder to trace than literary influence per se. It nevertheless deserves mention as contributing to the education and cultural appreciation of future Ottoman statesmen.

A second, closely connected, aspect of contemporary understanding of *şehname* manuscripts emphasizes their role as symbols of Ottoman imperial culture in book form. For Ottoman statesmen almost as much as for learned scholars, books were precious possessions and desirable gifts. In a study particularly relevant to the question of Ottoman *şehnames*, Lale Uluç has shown the extent to which Persian luxury manuscripts, especially from Shiraz, became collectors' items among the sixteenth-century Ottoman elite. A strong tradition of

¹¹ Tezcan, 'Politics of early modern Ottoman historiography', 175.

¹² Miniature reproduced in Gulru Necipoglu, *Architecture, ceremonial and power: the Topkapi Palace in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries* (New York 1991), 153.

¹³ M.J.L. Austin (trs.) and Geoffrey Lewis (ed.), *Domenico's Istanbul* (London 2001), 21.

shared appreciation of richly-worked manuscripts appears in the gifts given to sultans by vezirs. In 1582, for example, among the several books of Persian poetry presented to Murad III and his son Mehmed on the occasion of the latter's circumcision festival were two illustrated copies of Firdevsi's *Şahnama* given by the third vezir Siyavuş Pasha. Koca Sinan Pasha, five times grand vezir in the 1580s and 1590s, was a noted collector of illustrated Persian manuscripts produced in Iran, seven of which were taken into the palace library after his death in 1596.¹⁴ The fact that vezirs and pashas tended to favour collections of Persian poetry in illuminated manuscripts is an important link between the educated secular elite and the sultans' deliberate choice of the *şehname* genre for dynastic history. That Ottoman workshops could produce works of comparable value to those of Shiraz was an important cultural statement. Meanwhile, the acquisition of such valuable Persian works made an important political point – that the Ottomans were the stronger party in their constant rivalry and occasional wars with the Safavid shahs of Iran (especially that of 1578-90, during the reign of Murad III). The fact that the Safavids included valuable books in their diplomatic gifts, such as the Tahmasp (or Houghton) *Şahnama* given to Selim II on his accession, would only have reinforced this notion of superiority.¹⁵ It would be interesting to know how the Ottomans reciprocated.

In such light, the choice of the *şehname* genre for Ottoman court historiography is unsurprising. It was reinforced by a further practical element, the presence in Istanbul of increasing numbers of Persian craftsmen transported from Tabriz to Istanbul by Selim I and Süleyman after successful eastern campaigns. This influx had a 'dramatic' effect on the personnel and painting style of the Ottoman *nakkaşhane* (painters' workshop), making possible the illumination and illustration of a range of works, of which *şehnâme*s figure prominently but are not the only examples.¹⁶ Whereas Arifi's *Süleymanname* (completed 1558) contained 69 miniatures, and the second volume of Lokman's *Şehinşahname* (1592, on the reign of Murad III during the 1580s) contained 95, these were outshone by the 814 miniatures reportedly contained within the six volumes of the *Siyer-i Nebi* (c. 1596, Life of the Prophet). Commissioned *şehname* texts date from the second half of the sixteenth

¹⁴ Lale Uluç, 'Ottoman book collectors and illustrated sixteenth century Shiraz manuscripts', *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée: livres et lecture dans le monde Ottomane* 87-88 (1999), 85-107, esp. pp. 96, 99.

¹⁵ Uluç, 'Ottoman book collectors', 91.; Fıfız Çağman and Zeren Tanındı, 'Remarks on some manuscripts from the Topkapi Palace treasury in the context of Ottoman-Safavid relations', *Muqarnas* 13 (1996), 132-48.

¹⁶ Rogers, *Topkapi Saray Museum: the albums and illustrated manuscripts*, 183-5, esp. 184; 237-8.

century because there was the political will, an appropriate cultural environment and the artistic expertise to produce them.

A third way in which contemporaries may have ‘read’ the significance of *şehname* works was through their role in establishing the sultans as pre-eminent patrons of literature and art. This was apparent less in the generally unseen finished product and more in the lengthy and relatively visible process of production. Around seven years appears to have been the average length of time taken over illustrated works. The first volume of Lokman’s *Hünernâme* was in progress between 1577 and 1584, while the anonymous *Surname* on the 1582 circumcision festival was completed in 1589. However, the *Şahname-i Selim Han*, completed in 1581 may have been in progress for twelve years since Lokman first became *şehnameci* in 1569. During the reign of Murad III there were usually several major commissions under way at the same time. This leads to a further consideration. Artistic production under Murad III was so intensive that extra premises had to be found. Much of the work of drafting and some finishing took place not actually in Topkapı but in workshops in nearby parts of the city; folios worked on elsewhere were brought into the palace to be assembled.¹⁷ As just one example, in July 1589 Lokman and 69 artists, calligraphers, copyists, bookbinders and others were rewarded for work on the second volume of the *Hünernâme*.¹⁸ The involvement of so many individuals, with the knowledge of their servants, suppliers, families and social contacts, means that the number of ordinary people aware of the preparation of a major illustrated volume and of the effort going into it must have been in the hundreds at least. Thus, while there may have been little access to a finished *şehname*, its existence, magnificence and, perhaps, its message would have been no secret. Nor would its cost, especially as the imperial council was regularly faced with requests for rewards, promotions and bills for the purchase of raw materials. Extravagance was one of the main criticisms levied at Murad III and his artistic patronage.

These three contemporary ‘readings’ of *şehname* works place them in their immediate cultural and political context. For the sultan and his close circle who saw the finished product, the pictorial and rhetorical content of *şehnames* were designed to reinforce the dynasty’s imperial status and its sense of achievement. They were associated with a prestigious literary genre. As priceless manuscripts they added to the numbers of *objets d’art* in the sultans’ private collection. To a broader section of the Ottoman elite, including many

¹⁷ Alan Fisher and Carol G. Fisher, ‘A note on the location of the royal Ottoman painting ateliers’, *Muqarnas* 3 (1985), 118-20.

¹⁸ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, KK 252, 23-4

former privy chamber pages turned pasha turned vezir, they were part of a general cultural and political understanding of Ottoman identity. To the craftsmen involved, and to sections of the general populace, they functioned as one means by which sultans were seen to fulfill an expected role as cultural patrons and providers of employment. The fact that *şehnames* had no tangible influence upon later historiography is a lesser consideration which obscures these contemporary aspects.

Modern readings

The *şehnamecilik* has so far been considered in a narrow sense as a purely Ottoman phenomenon. Broader comparison with official and literary historiography under other dynasties and other cultures would bring useful perspectives. To what extent the Ottomans differed from other Muslim dynasties in creating a permanent post of court historiographer and in determining the nature of the material produced, remains to be seen. Were any of the royal biographies commissioned by the Mamluk sultans associated with a post specific to the purpose? If not, why not, and what difference would it have made? Contemporary histories in Arabic of Saladin and Baybars share with *şehname* texts similar notions of the ideal ruler and the use of elaborate, sometimes impenetrable, language required to express these adequately. However, such Mamluk texts were produced by royal secretaries or chancery officials, whose primary roles – like those of most Ottoman historians – were administrative.¹⁹ Comparisons with Safavid historiography may be instructive, particularly with regard to the patronage of both historical writing and illustrated manuscripts under Shah Abbas I (1587-1628).²⁰ Close parallels to the Ottoman *şehnameci* perhaps appear also in sixteenth and particularly seventeenth-century Europe. Kings of England, Scotland and France each supported a post of royal historiographer. Occasional products in the early 1500s were essentially ‘humanist exercises’ in Latin, i.e. employing a rhetorical style in the literary language of the educated elite, just as sixteenth-century Ottomans *şehnamecis* used Persian. Although these histories were printed and available for dissemination among Latin-reading scholars throughout Europe and thus had a ‘quasi-diplomatic function’ lacking for Ottoman *şehnames*, the basic concept of exemplary and supportive historiography remains the same. More strikingly, in all three countries from varying points in the seventeenth

¹⁹ P. M. Holt, ‘The sultan as ideal ruler: Ayyubid and Mamluk prototypes’ in Metin Kunt and Christine Woodhead (eds), *Süleyman the Magnificent and his age: the Ottoman empire in the early modern world* (London 1995), 122-37.

²⁰ See Sholeh A. Quinn, *Historical writing during the reign of Shah ‘Abbas: ideology, imitation and legitimacy in Safavid chronicles* (Salt Lake City 2000).

century a continuous series of historiographers royal appears, of men who were predominantly literary appointees, the majority of them undistinguished before, during and after their period of office. Exceptions, such as Dryden in England, Racine in France and in eighteenth-century Scotland the historian William Robertson, merely served to prove the rule.²¹ The products, if any, of most appointees were also mediocre. The historiographer royal nevertheless appears to have been a necessary component of the royal household, his post existing as an opportunity for the exercise of royal patronage. As argued above, if the *şehnameci* and all the artists and craftsmen associated with his work are taken into account, the *şehnamecilik* as a vehicle for Ottoman cultural patronage is one of the most significant aspects of the post's existence. A further Ottoman parallel should also be drawn here with the many poets who received regular financial rewards from sultans. For instance, in the seven years from 1528 to 1535 the poet Hayalî received eleven gifts from Süleyman of 1000 *akçe* each, generally in response to the presentation of a *kaside* on one of the major religious festivals. On some of these occasions Hayalî was one of more than fifteen recipients of similar sums.²² More specifically, Lami'î Çelebi (d. 1532), one of the most outstanding Ottoman literary figures of the early sixteenth century, was renowned for his translations into Ottoman of Persian classics, both prose and verse, often at the sultan's request. For these he was rewarded financially with a daily stipend of 35 *akçes* and on one occasion with a gift of village tax revenues by Selim I.²³ The first *şehnameci* Arifî came to Süleyman's attention as a poet worthy of such *ad hoc* gifts; his appointment, and the post itself, can be seen as a natural development of such patronage.

Süleyman's choice of the *şehname* genre for court historiography thus reflects the fact that Ottoman historical writing in the mid sixteenth century was regarded as a branch of literature. Persian verse was a natural choice of medium; eloquence and the panegyric overtones of the *kaside* were part and parcel of the genre. The Ottoman court was a highly lettered court. From another point of view, *şehname* writing represents the culmination of the style of exemplary historiography of the early Ottoman period which focussed upon the sultan's deeds and achievements as proof of his worthiness to rule. The major *şehname* texts

²¹ Denys Hay, 'The historiographers royal in England and Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review* 31 (1951), 15-29; Orest Ranum, *Artisans of glory: history and historical thought in seventeenth-century France* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina 1980).

²² İsmail E. Erünsal, 'Türk edebiyatı tarihin arşiv kaynakları II: Kanunî Sultan Süleyman devrine ait bir in'amat defteri', *Osmanlı araştırmaları* IV (1984), 1-17.

²³ Günay Kut Alpay, 'Lâmi'î Çelebi and his works', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 35/2 (1976), 73-93; for Lami'î Çelebi's library of around 120 books see the inventory list in İsmail E. Erünsal, 'Türk edebiyatı tarihin arşiv kaynakları IV: Lami'î Çelebi'nin terekesi', *Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (1990), 180-81.

such as Lokman's two-volume *Hünername*, primarily on Selim I and Süleyman, and his three-volume *Şehinşahname* on Murad III could be said to portray the ultimate Ottoman dynastic myth, that of power through unassailable virtue and magnificence. They were also demonstrable responses to works of advice literature on how to rule justly and successfully. A useful comparison could be made between Mustafa Ali's critical *Nushatu 's-selatin* (1581), with its list of six 'personal gifts' and sixteen 'requirements' of rule of the Ottoman dynasty, and Talikizade's *Şema'ilname* (c.1594, the work criticised by Murad III) which sets out twenty 'admirable qualities' of the dynasty from the court historiographer's – and supposedly the sultan's – point of view.²⁴

Rulers who commissioned official histories usually did so at times of personal or political difficulty in order to enhance their own status. Assessing court historiography in a purely political sense, Baki Tezcan suggests that Murad III attempted to use it to justify his own form of 'royal absolutism', which was unacceptable to 'the Ottoman intellectual elite' and resulted in the 'failure' and consequent disappearance of the post a few years after Murad's death. In other words, 'the fate of the works produced by court historiographers should be interpreted as signs of a royal failure to dictate a certain understanding of Ottoman history to the intellectual elite' who had their own 'legalist agenda'.²⁵ Such an understanding of *şehnâme*s moves away from the literary perspective to stress the political.. It is certainly the case that from almost the beginning of his reign Murad III attempted to exert his own authority against that of the grand vezir, resulting in a five-year political battle to undermine the incumbent grand vezir Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, in office from 1566 to his assassination in 1579. Subsequent appointees were subject to frequent dismissal, served only short tenures and, as intended, were never as secure or authoritative as Sokullu had been. Murad III's outlook was influenced by a circle of close advisers whose controversial presence caused much criticism and had a destabilising effect on vezirial government. In this context, quite apart from his personal interests as a cultural and literary patron, Murad did seek to use *şehnâme* writing in defence of his own authority and took a keen interest in the images presented. However, this returns to the question of the dissemination of *şehnâme*s, what influence these works could have had and whether they could actually have generated such a negative response so as to bring about the termination of the post. The fact that three copies of one of Lokman's works were presented to senior officials, and that relatively large

²⁴ Andreas Tietze (ed.), *Mustafâ 'Âlî's Counsel for sultans of 1581* (Vienna 1979), v. I; Woodhead, 'Murad III and the historians', 93-96.

²⁵ Tezcan, 'Politics of early modern Ottoman historiography', 170.

numbers of people would have been aware of *şehname* production does not demonstrate that ‘the Ottoman intellectual elite’ were particularly concerned. It may even be the case that there was a demand of sorts for copies of the *Kiyafetü l-insaniye* portrait album. The principal contemporary critic of the *şehnamecilik* was Mustafa Ali, whose negative comments have to be taken into account. However, he was not consistent in his views and commented less on the genre and the post and more on what he considered to be the poor standard of Lokman’s writing.²⁶ Ironically, Ali himself is the perhaps only writer known to have seen and quoted from a *şehname*, Talikîzade’s account of Mehmed III’s Hungarian campaign of 1596.²⁷ Other writers mention neither the post nor its products. Silence may equal criticism, or simply lack of interest.

A negative reaction by Ottoman intellectuals to Murad’s use of *şehname* texts should certainly not be ruled out as a factor in the post’s demise, though evidence for this seems sparse at present. However, Tezcan’s broader argument – that the *şehnamecilik* was a feature of sixteenth-century Ottoman government as ‘a personal enterprise’, in contrast to the eighteenth-century post of *vak’a-nüvis* which represented ‘an impersonal institution’ – places the *şehnamecilik* in a significant perspective. The development of the sultan-centred empire into the bureaucratic state accelerated in the later sixteenth century, despite Murad III’s attempted ‘royal absolutism’. It perhaps makes more sense to regard the *şehnamecilik* not as a failure which was actively rejected by a certain group but more generally as a casualty of the political, economic and social changes at the end of the sixteenth century. By 1600, maintenance of the post itself was difficult to justify; the *berat* of appointment for Hasan Hukmî in 1601 implies that he was to be more of an annalist or recorder of events than a spokesman. Attempts to associate Ottoman sultans with Persian epic heroes, however dilute the connection may have become, was an irrelevance, if not an embarrassment. Yet, a comparable projection of imperial imagery was composed for Ahmed I by Mustafa Safî around 1614. The first half of this work is devoted to *menakib* proving the sultan’s high moral qualities, his intelligence, generosity and piety. Similar in approach to Talikîzade’s *Şemailname*, it too appears to counter some of Mustafa Ali’s criticisms of sultanic government in the *Counsel for sultans*. Most significant in Safî’s work is the emphasis upon

²⁶ Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and intellectual in the Ottoman empire: the historian Mustafa Âli (1541-1600)* (Princeton 1986), 248-9.

²⁷ Given in Jan Schmidt, *Mustafâ ‘Âlî’s Künhü l-ahbar and its preface according to the Leiden manuscript* (Istanbul 1987), 63-8: Ali’s extracts are from Talikîzade’s *Egri fethi tarihi* (formally entitled *Şehname-i sultan-i selatin-i cihan*) written 1597-8 and probably seen by Ali before the work was presented to Mehmed III.

Ahmed I's piety, rather than magnificence or authority per se.²⁸ Entitled *Zübdetü 't-tevarih*, the work carried resonances of *şehname* productions, but without the extravagance, the illuminations or the apparatus of the *şehnameci*'s office.

Having reached its peak in the reign of Murad III, the *şehname* genre had largely burnt itself out, with only occasional seventeenth-century commissions to follow. The fact that one of these was composed for Osman II by the *kazasker* (chief judge) Ganîzade, and that another was commissioned by Murad IV from the *kadi* Nergisî may suggest that members of the *ulema* were prepared to be associated with the *şehname* genre. Equally, the choice of these two leading literary figures suggests that the original purpose of *şehname* writing, the production of works of literary art, remained. A final review of the work of the sixteenth-century Ottoman court historiographers concludes that *şehnames* were literary and cultural artefacts first, and vehicles for sultanic propaganda second, though a clear distinction is not always evident nor, probably, intended.

²⁸ Rhoads Murphey, 'Mustafa Safi's version of the kingly virtues as presented in his *Zübdet 'ül tevarih*, or Annals of Sultan Ahmed, 1012-1023 A.H./1603-1614 A.D.', in Colin Imber and K. Kiyotaki (eds), *Frontiers of Ottoman studies* (London 2005), v. I, 5-24.